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ABSTRACT

An ongoing project has been established to (1) summarize and disseminate results of research on children and television to the creative community responsible for commercial and educational children's television, and (2) defuse the issues that have created a rift between this community and the academic community. The research efforts discussed in the two volumes of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) update on Television and Human Behavior (1983) are currently being summarized and condensed into a 20-page document designed for the creative community. An assessment of the need for such materials indicates that a very small proportion of academic television research is useful, or at least perceived as useful, to the creative community, although much curiosity exists for relevant research. Six areas of research useful to both academics and the creators of children's television have been identified to guide selection of research reports from the NIMH update: (1) how children learn television's positive messages, (2) what television features are most attractive to children and maintain their interest and attention, (3) what children understand about television people and events, (4) how television is related to children's other intellectual skills, (5) how children might be taught to use and view television wisely, and (6) how television might be used effectively to promote widespread education on social issues. Tables provide summaries of research findings on attention, age-related changes in comprehension, and learning prosocial behavior from television. Twelve references are listed. (LMM)

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Communicating research findings to television's creative community: Public policy and the impact of educational television[1]

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Communicating research findings to television's creative community: Public policy and the impact of educational television

Background

Public policy issues are traditionally thought of as those in which some governmental agency interveres, to some end advocated by a particular segment of the population. Often this intervention is undertaken to improve an existing situation. Rossiter (1980) has defined a public policy issue - in this particular case advertising to children - as one in which:

(a) a specific ... practice,
(b) or, an entire category of ... (practices) is perceived as,
(c) utilizing means or,
(d) resulting in ends which,
(e) are contrary to the ethical values,
(f) held by some publicly significant party.

Kozma, in this session (1984), has identified educational television for children as an issue with potential public policy implications; I would like to further extend this to any television from which children learn - which as we know - encompasses not only educational but also commercial television aimed at both children and adults. Further, Kozma has suggested that there is a body of research material, based primarily on research conducted in the academic world, that might prove useful to those who create and produce children's television. The purpose of this paper is to describe an ongoing project in which several of us at Michigan are attempting to disseminate results of research on children and television to members of the creative community responsible for commercial and educational children's television.

The issue of children's television has been a curious one in terms of public policy implementation. While there have been several major areas in which governmental bodies have intervened with public policy goals, it is fair to say that most of the public policy changes that have taken place regarding children's television have been outside the formal policy arena (ie. the broadcasters themselves).

For example, while hundreds of research studies were either commissioned to investigate, or independently investigated, the relationship between televised violence and childhood aggression, very little permanent change in network programming was demanded or could be enforced through the public policy system. Similarly, while the

Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has sponsored hearings regarding the nature and value of advertising during programming aimed at children, most change that has taken place was instituted, not by the FTC, but by voluntary agreement within the industry itself, through recommendations of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). While the reasons behind the small policy impact could provide the main body of another paper, it suffices to say that two major concerns preventing governmental bodies from firmly controlling children's television are: (1) the unfamiliarity with research findings, or the apparently equivocal results of policy research, and (2) the perceived threat to the First Amendment.

As regards the former: Whether we like it or not, the term children and television has been synonymous with television and aggression, particularly since the publication of the Surgeon General's report on Television and Human Behavior (1972). From the early leaking of, and misinterpretation of, its findings (cf. Rubinstein, 1980), to the recent critique of research methodologies by the American Broadcasting Company (1983), academics and the public alike have argued whether television really has an impact on aggressive behavior. It is clear that, to the extent that the research findings are interpreted by policy-makers as equivocal, little major policy change has occurred or will be forthcoming.

Regarding the latter: Recent decisions by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC, 1983) also point to the concern by media policy makers about "stepping on" First Amendment rights. From the commissioners' (3-1) perspective, requiring individual television affiliates to carry a fixed amount of age-appropriate or educational television, or controlling specific advertising practices, amounts to infringement on freedom of speech. While there is a goodly amount of disagreement with this interpretation, particularly by lobbying groups such as Action for Children's Television (ACT), this argument is used as a strong rationale for preventing the government from regulating children's television, or television in general. This was true even during the time when much television research consisted of work detailing the negative messages or negative impact of the medium.

Within the past dozen years there has been a shift in emphasis in the type of research conducted in the area of children's television. One could characterize this shift as one from content-based, critical of the medium, to more form-based, objective, and focussed on cognitive processes of children's information processing. Several reasons probably led to this shift. First, funding agencies, and the federal government in particular, stopped funding most television and aggression research, and with it, much of the

social learning works. In conjunction with this, as pointed out by Kozma (1984), research emphases in behavioral sciences adopted a primarily cognitive focus; research in television simply shifted to this cognitive approach. Additionally, and beginning with Sesame Street, educational television for children succeeded. As it became popular, so did research approaches that investigated the range of materials taught by and learned from television.

New policy emphasis

It seems that with the shift in emphasis in research questions - for example moving from "negative-valence" issues of television aggression, stereotypes, advertising deception, and so on, to those based less on content - attention, comprehension - our conception of public policy interventions might also be undergoing some changes. I propose that it is moving from one characterized by a focus on prohibition and control to one based on "consciousness-raising." The focus is less on governmental intervention, and more on reaching and affecting broadcasters and creators of media material.

The present project is designed to take advantage of this re-interpretation of policy implementation. It has two goals:

1. To summarize recent research on children and their responses to television for the creative community in which educational and commercial television for children is created; the type of research summarized is characteristic of the research reported here today (Kozma, 1984; Torres, 1984; Campos, 1984), having more to do with cognitive variables such as attention and comprehension, than with television content and social learning.

2. To defuse the issues that have created a rift between television's creative community and the academic community - namely those of aggression and stereotyping; this defusing, if accomplished, might allow for better communication between those who create television, and those who research it.

Unfortunately I feel that we have a long way to go before a non-adversarial relationship is achieved between academics and most of the creative community.[2] I'm not quite as optimistic as is Bob Kozma that this "dialogue,"

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[2]Clearly this need does not exist for Children's Television Workshop, where they have successfully implemented a production environment in which the research department actively interacts with production teams.

that sounds so good theoretically, is ultimately practical. However, as can be seen from our efforts, we're willing to attempt some communication.

The project

Obviously if one chooses to summarize "the information on children and television" one has identified a rather large task. One only needs to consult Murray's (1980) bibliography of research works to understand the size of such an undertaking. Therefore, we chose to make use of the recently-published National Institute of Mental Health update on Television and Human Behavior (NIMH, 1983). These two volumes represent for the most part the research conducted and summarized during the past ten or so years. These sources were chosen both for reasons of economy and since the bulk of the work represented new directions. Since we felt much of this work to be useful and perhaps novel, we attempted to summarize and condense much of it for creators, writers, directors, and producers, of educational and commercial television.[3]

Our intention is to disseminate the materials to the creative community. In the course of doing such a project, we have continually conducted our own formative evaluations - to assess the need for such materials, the interest in them, and the way in which they should be organized to answer production-related questions. Meetings have been held with representatives from research units of two major networks, in addition to the Public Broadcasting System, and Nickelodeon, the cable channel for children. Additionally, we met with representatives of the Caucus for Producers, Writers, and Directors, the union to which many of the creators belong.

Based on their feedback and suggestions, we are nearing completion of a 20-page document designed to summarize useful materials, but along the lines of answering production-related, rather than academically-based, questions. After a year and a half of work, I can make several summary comments:

1. A very small proportion of television research done by academics is useful, or at least perceived as useful, to the creative community. Two very different sets of questions are being asked.

2. There are a variety of existing methods used by the creative community to keep appraised of useful research

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[3]We relied on both the original volume (II) and on the NIMH summary of that volume (I). Additionally we consulted most of the original works.

in this area. In contrast to an opinion expressed several years ago by Alberta Siegel (1980), it seems that there is much curiosity within the creative community for relevant research!

3. There are several defensive "humps" - particularly the issue of effects of aggressive television - that we must get over if we wish to establish a full dialogue with the creative community.

Some "data" for the above assertions are provided below.

Procedure

Through interviews with creative artists and research directors within the industry, six areas of questions useful to both academics and creators were identified. The research reports contained in the NIMH update were carefully scanned for materials relevant to the following issues:

(1) How do children learn some of television's positive messages?

(2) What features of TV seem to be most attractive to children, and are best at recruiting and maintaining their interest and attention? That is, what is entertaining to a -- year-old?

(3) What do children understand about television people and events?

(4) How is television related to children's other intellectual skills, such as imagination, reading, writing?

(5) How might children be taught to use and view TV wisely?

(6) How might television be used effectively to promote widespread education on social issues such as emotional development, health, cultural understanding, and so forth?

As can be seen from the material summarized in the following tables, we chose material that dealt mostly with cognitive impacts. It is not surprising that most of these findings are selected from studies focussing mainly on, or at least using, educational programs. We attempted to select only that information that was (a) useful in the actual production process, and (b) replicated in more than a single investigation. We felt that it made more sense to organize around concepts rather than authors, so material was segmented into that having to do with attention,

learning, and age-specific cognitive processes involved in comprehension.

What do we know about children and educational television, or about children and television in general, that would prove useful to its creators? Some of this material is summarized on the following pages, organized as it is in the information booklet. Please refer to Tables 1, 2, and 3. Table 1 presents summaries of several findings on attention; Table 2 presents some summaries of age-related changes in comprehension; Table 3 summarizes works on learning prosocial behavior from television.

Table 1
Sample material from the information booklet
What children attend to on television

I. What catches and holds attention:

(A) Young children's attention is sometimes caught or held by what's on the screen; other times, they don't pay attention to the set. There are several features that have been shown to be able to get and hold children's attention to TV. For young children (2-5) these features include:

* women's voices
* women characters
* children's voices
* peculiar voices - such as puppets
* changes in sounds
* unusual sound effects
* action related to the plot
* lively music
* laughing on-screen
* applause
* rhythm and rhyme

(B) When some other features are present, they tend to LOSE children's attention. Among these features are:

* male voices
* long camera zooms & pans
* still pictures
* long complex speeches
* content that can be understood from the audio track alone

Even though there is a relationship between these features and children's attention, most young children will pay attention to what they understand. They will stop attending to something that they don't understand, usually no matter what features are present. This "rule" becomes especially true as children get older - about age 7 and above. When the content is beyond their comprehension, they often tune out.

(C) For older children, around 8 and above, the features listed above do not always have the same effect on attention. Since older children's attention is guided more by the plot or content, there are additional, plot-related elements that produce attention to the screen. These include:

* conflict situation and tension build-up
* action related to the theme

* a clear plot with semi-predictable outcome

However, even for older children, attention will sometimes be affected by salient features, such as music and special audio and visual effects. They tend to be much more interested in meaningful elements of the plot, though. While a general tendency of writers is to write or talk down to a child, children will lose interest rather rapidly in a condenscending presentation. They prefer material that is challenging, mixed with elements that are sometimes just unique or perplexing enough to make viewing and understanding an intellectual exercise as well as one of entertainment.

Table 2
Sample material from the information booklet
How children learn from television

(I) Preschool and early elementary:

Very young children, ages two to seven, are generally convinced of the authenticity of television, particularly non-animated television. They often believe that it is a fairly accurate portrayal of much of the real world. They believe television's most important role - both for programming and advertising - is one of education; TV informs people about the world. TV watching is difficult for children at this age though - they have some difficulty in separating out the central, plot-relevant information, from the incidental, irrelevant material.

In a typical TV show, particularly a dramatic narrative, there are some portions that are crucial to the central plot, and others that are tangential to the plot. Adults usually know which parts to pay closest attention to, and to concentrate on, so they will understand the story line. They also know which ones they need not worry about. However, children have trouble distinguishing what's relevant from what's irrelevant in a program.

Often they pay so much attention to details that are not essential to the story that they COMPLETELY MISS the the most important parts, as well as the intended message. In fact, when asked to recount the basic plot of a typical television drama, preschool children can recall very little of what they saw. And what they do remember has little to do with the central theme. The concept of a program theme is lost on them. Older children retain more of the content central to the plot.

Also, very young children are not likely to recognize, let alone use, information about character intent and motivation as explanations for their behavior. They have a good deal of difficulty in knowing that what happens early in the program is at all related to what happens later. As an example, imagine yourself watching the Wizard of Oz as a child - imagine how much more you get from it now - were you aware that the Tin Man, the Lion, the Scarecrow, were really the farm hands from Kansas. Young children aren't aware of anything as subtle as this.

This difficulty in piecing together individual scenes, and in hooking up character actions with consequences (e.g., a criminal committing a crime and subsequent jail sentence) means that what adults take for granted is completely missed by children. For example, they are not likely to come away with the message that was intended (e.g., "crime doesn't

pay").

There are several ways to aid young children's memory for important parts of the show. One is to highlight the key elements of the story by using certain production elements - quick zooms or close-ups, carefully employed sound effects or music. They may be even more confused, however, if nonessential elements are similarly highlighted. Another way to increase comprehension is to present settings and events that are familiar to the children.

(II) Middle elementary:

As they become increasingly cynical about television and the world of adults, at about age eight, they come to understand that much of TV is entertaining; it really doesn't represent real life very well; they are increasingly able to separate out the different functions of television - news and PBS are for education, the Dukes of Hazzard and Happy Days are for fun; commercials are to persuade and sometimes to deceive.

However, children at this age still have some difficulty with the meanings of complex adult programs. They now start to bring real-life experiences and knowledge to bear on their interpretation of television; but they've only been around a few years. There is much more to learn. It is still quite difficult for elementary-aged children to use their inferential capabilities to make sense out of television. They are still likely to confuse some complex motives, behaviors, and consequences. This happens to them in their dealings with real people, too!

****** Some points to remember about these TWO ages ******

a. Young children do not understand complex TV material because:

(1) they can't select out important, plot-relevant material

(2) the important material comes too fast for them, not giving them time to reflect on meaning

(3) a lot of exciting information - that is not plot relevant - captures their attention, but confuses them

(4) they do not understand the importance of remembering events in the order in which they occurred in the program

(5) they don't make INFERENCES - like adults do - about the motivation or intention that TV characters have for doing things in the program.

b. Things that help children understand TV material include:

(1) creative use of visual and audio techniques that highlight important, plot-relevant information

(2) having characters verbalize how they feel or what they are thinking or planning

(3) using a narrator who explains the plot to the viewer (also, when an adult co-viewer labels the information)

(4) making use of material that is fairly familiar to them - for example, when black children are watching portrayals of a black family, or when children are watching other children.

(III) Adolescence:

Finally, a curious thing happens at about age 12, the time when children enter adolescence. Their viewing patterns shift - adult dramas become their favorite type of program. They also return again to thinking about television's role as one of teacher - and they say this explicitly when researchers ask them: we use TV to find out what adults are like, and what we will do when we grow up.

Their favorite programs to learn from? Love Boat, Dallas, Dynasty, General Hospital, and sometimes the Playboy channel.

****** Some points to remember about this age ******

(1) memory for television information improves with age. Even 8-year-old children do not remember material very well. By age 12 children are much better at understanding much TV information.

(2) teenagers, as much as young children, rely on television to educate them about what will be expected of them when they become adults.

Table 3
Sample material from the information booklet
Learning prosocial behavior

It has been shown that television may actually promote prosocial behavior in children, especially preschool children. By "prosocial" people usually mean behavior that is socially desirable, or that in some way benefits another person or society. Children imitate the following types of prosocial behavior seen on television:

*affectionate behavior, friendship
*helping others
*sharing, cooperation
*showing sympathy for others
*understanding others' feelings
*learning to be patient
*accepting individuals who may be different from them

There are several things that may enhance the effects of prosocial television. The following will maximize the chances that children will imitate the prosocial behavior of a television character:

(1) if the character receives a reward - fairly immediately - for his or her actions; this should not be a prize or material reward, but positive reactions by others, or other positive consequences for the behavior

(2) if the contrasting behavior - the "wrong" or antisocial behavior - is NOT portrayed; young children may get confused about what to imitate, so it's always better just to show what they should copy

(3) if the character is warm and nurturant, all the while being shown as a high-status, powerful character

(4) if the prosocial behavior is labelled verbally, as well as being shown; for example, having another character comment on it, or by using a voice-over

(5) if a variety of prosocial models - children, adults, puppets, etc. - are used in a variety of settings

(6) In general, the most important thing to emphasize is that prosocial action SUCCEEDS!

SUMMARY:

There are many changes that occur during childhood. Some of the cognitive changes, the ones that influence children's abilities to think and to process information, are relevant to how they are affected by television. Very young children think differently from teenagers, and teens think differently from adults. A good deal of research has been conducted over the past 10-15 years that summarizes these differences. Educators, parents, and creators of television, both prime-time and children's, can benefit from knowing about some of these findings.

'It is not possible to properly cite all research summarized here. In the pamphlet these studies are listed as additional sources. Also, names and addresses of many of the researchers are provided, in addition to their specialized area.

Current status

As alluded to earlier, several insights were gained as we presented various "editions" of this booklet, in progress, to possible audiences. Simply stated, there was a good deal of criticism of academic research as being too irrelevant, too filled with jargon, to be useful to the creative community. While creators of programming, usually under intense time pressures, want to know "What does a six-year-old want to see?" or "How do I get this message across to an eight-year-old?", most academic research is seldom phrased in such simplistic (or straightforward) terms.

Additionally, the present setup for disseminating academic research leaves a good deal to be desired from the creators' perspectives. In order to keep up with the most recent works, they must do as we do: attend the various specialized conferences, identify and sift through specialized journals in education, psychology, communication, political science, and so on, in hopes of finding a few articles that are relevant. They then must essentially decode the jargon, interpret the tables of numbers and graphs, and read the authors' interpretations, usually searching desperately for any useful information. As one producer explained to me - each evening they load their briefcases (much like academics) with the latest industry magazines, scripts, and various papers and messages that need attention. Their day begins early, ends late, and the pace is as hectic, if not more so, than the pace of academic researchers. They simply have no time to pack off to the library to search through academic journals, or to carry such journals home with them for light bedtime reading.

How, then, do they keep informed - as I earlier claimed? There are several methods. One method is by using an organization called National Council for Children and Television, headquartered in Princeton, that is in the forefront of educating the creative industry. Composed of a group of academics and creative persons, NCCT holds seminars, offers a speakers bureau, publishes a journal called Children & Television, and disseminates news releases and research updates. A NCCT news release (NCCT, 1982) lists their goals as:

(1) To help people involved in the creation, purchase, sponsorship, and distribution of entertainment and information on television and other electronic media become more aware of their opportunities to serve the best interests of children and those who care for them;

(2) To help children, their families, and teachers, become more discerning and critically appreciative members of the television viewing audience.

A few researchers from academia make use of this option to communicate their research findings. However, since the NCCT journal is not a "high-prestige" journal - indeed far from it - there is no rush to publish from the academic side. Also, some measure of "quality control" is exercised regarding workshop participants - to insure that there are in fact interesting and useful exchanges of information and insights. These reservations aside, our experience has shown that a rather wide segment of the production industry is at least familiar with NCCT and with the materials that they so ably disseminate.

Additionally, all three networks, plus PBS and Nickelodeon, maintain research departments. These vary widely in quality of research supported, interest in and devotion to children's issues, and willingness to communicate and cooperate with academics. However, it is more frequently true that they are interested and cooperative that that they are not. Surprisingly, both sides bemoan the lack of communication and cooperation.

Finally, a few academics serve as consultants to the networks on issues of child development. Often however these are not academics who do work on children and television. Why not? To answer this question, put yourself in the place of a scriptwriter who is writing a piece on, say, jazz music for an after-school special. She needs a consultant on jazz history, or modern jazz, or the development of music appreciation in children, much more than she needs someone to tell her about a pan or a zoom. As pointed out to me by a writer in recounting an episode with his daughter an television:

> "... when you're talking about zooms and that sort of thing, these are things that we've done all our lives; it is second nature to us. But maybe we could see if we could pin something down that is not common sense. During the Vietnam War CBS showed some film, live film, where a man walked up to a prisoner on his knees and shot him in the face. My daughter screamed when that happened and for three nights that child had nightmares. How did she know that was real? She was eight at the time, and understood that (program for which he wrote) wasn't real. How do kids differentiate between reality and fantasy there? What does your research come up with?"

His point: That as a creator and as a parent, there really are significant research questions that he would like to have answered. Due to situational constraints, both on

his part and on ours as researchers, these questions had not yet been answered. It seems to me that if we desire to communicate with the creative community, we must do two things. We must do research that is not necessarily common-sense from their perspective - work that has some real-world implications. And, we must go out of our way to reach those people in their own language and through their own means of dissemination, not only those who are motivated to learn - like creators of educational television - but also those who are interested but not part of the educational television "consortium." It may not be a particularly easy task, but I'm convinced that, in the end, it will prove rewarding for all concerned.

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